An analysis of topics in Prinmi: In a cross-linguistic perspective

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Prinmi is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Yunnan and Sichuan provinces of southwest China. It demonstrates a high degree of topic prominence, as discussed in Li and Thompson (1976). Topic prominence is a typological characteristic of Sino-Tibetan languages, cf. Chao's (1968) analysis of spoken Chinese. It probably represents an areal feature of South-East Asia, which, as a linguistic area, embraces mainland South-East Asia and south China. Furthermore, topic prominence is also observed in such Sino-spheric languages as Japanese and Korean.

This paper presents an analysis of topics in Prinmi, based on first-hand data collected for a large scale typological study of information structure. A variety of topics are found in Prinmi in the study; Table 1 shows how they may be encoded.

Function	zero	*ggi* Topic; Accessible Ref.	*bbo* Contrast; Frame-setting	*ggi bbo* Contrastive topic
Aboutness Topic (AbT)	√	√		
Frame-setting Topic (FsT)	√		√	
Contrastive AbT		(√)	√	√
Contrastive FsT			√	
Implicational AbT			√	√
After-thought Topic		√		

Table 1: The four basic ways for expressing topics in Prinmi

The topic-comment construction can be used to convey complex information, such as:

(a) *Chained comment construction*:
Topic + $Comment_1$ + $Comment_2$ (+ … + $Comment_n$)
(b) *Contrastive topic-comment construction*:
$Topic_1$-$Comment_1$ + $Topic_2$-$Comment_2$ (+ … + $Topic_n$-$Comment_n$)
(c) *Recursive topic-comment*:
Hanging $Topic_S$ + Comment
//
$Topic_{S1}$-$Comment_1$ (+ … + $Topic_{Sn}$-$Comment_{Sn}$)

I will discuss the function of the variety of topics in Prinmi. Their encoding as well as the syntactic structure of topic-comment construction will be investigated in detail.